

The Role of Government in the Development of Modern Chinese Expositions (1909–1949)

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In western countries, commodity fairs (expositions) emerge naturally when capitalism, especially the market economic system, develops to a certain level. The government tends to play a limited role in the development of such events. In contrast, in modern China, the government has played a more important role than is often common elsewhere, not just because of a strong sense of responsibility, but also for the purpose of revitalizing industry and commerce as a key driver of economic development. Thus, by analyzing the role of government in the development of expositions, this article concludes that such phenomena represent a reasonable model for modernization.

1 A Modern Chinese Exposition in Tianjin

A key economic center in northern China, the city of Tianjin (天津) has played an important role in modern Chinese history. This city has also been at the forefront of the development of modern Chinese expositions; Tianjin has actively participated in trade fairs both at home and abroad to promote economic exchange and cooperation. In addition, a museum was established in Tianjin and scientific culture has been promoted; the Tianjin History Museum has played an important role in the development of modern Chinese expositions.

Yuan Shikai and the Modern Chinese Exposition

Yuan Shikai (袁世凱, 1859–1916) was a famous statesman and strategist in the history of China as well as a northern leader and warlord.

In 1900, the city of Tianjin was invaded by troops of the Eight-Nation Alliance. This occupation destroyed businesses, depressed the local economy, and caused a great deal of disturbance to local society. In order to rectify social order and manage the Qing government implementation of the BeiYang “New Deal,” Yuan Shikai appointed Zhou Xuexi (周学熙, 1866–1947) to develop the Zhili (直隸) Technology Administration to turn Tianjin into the engineering hub of the province to innovate industry.

Indeed, when the Panama-Pacific International Exposition was held in San Francisco, Yuan Shikai provided a great deal of support to enable the participation of Tianjin.

In May 1913, the United States recognized the Beijing government. Thus, in order to promote the Republic of China around the world, Yuan Shikai actively prepared the country for participation in the next World Expo, establishing “The Preparatory Affairs Bureau of Panama Expo.” He noted that while the first purpose of this development was political, “for my new colored flag (the national flag of the Yuan Shikai government) and competition with the nations,” the second was to augment Chinese foreign relations, in particular to reward the United States government for providing recognition. The Chinese were very successful at this World Expo: national exhibits won 1,211 prizes, more than any other participating country.

Zhou Xuexi and the Modern Chinese Exposition

Zhou Xuexi was a well-known modern Chinese industrialist.

Zhou Xuexi managed the Zhili Technology Administration in 1903, one of the most important bodies tasked with innovating industry as part of the BeiYang “New Deal.” However, because Zhou Xuexi believed that this process could not take place unless it was advocated by the government, he actively promoted Chinese industry and technology. Thus, the Zhili Technology Administration promoted the development of a Chinese exposition.

In 1906, Zhou Xuexi encouraged, developed, and hosted the Tianjin Fair for Industry. One important innovation that he introduced was adoption of a tax exemption for Chinese goods at the fair; this attracted more participants, including more than one hundred industries and local shops.

For the protection and promotion of industry and commerce, to impart technology as part of civil power, and to enable people to put all their energies into work, Zhou Xuexi also developed a series of higher schools, industrial and educational workshops, industrial fairs, iron works, and sites for the manufacture of industrial products.

2 The 1909 Wuhan Trade Fair

Chen Kuilong (陳夔龍, 1857–1948) was a famous official of the Qing Dynasty who initiated the Wuhan (武漢) Trade Fair in 1909. This event was the antecedent of the China Fair.

Chen Kuilong and the 1909 Wuhan Trade Fair

Chen Kuilong supervised Hubei (湖北) in 1909 following Zhang Zhidong (張之洞, 1837–1909). Among his achievements, he is noted for remarking that “agriculture is for reproduction, industry is for distribution, and commerce is for trading.” Chen Kuilong initiated the Wuhan Trade Fair as a mechanism to encourage production.

Why was this trade fair first held in Hubei?

Because of implementation of local power in this region and initial awakening of the consciousness of the main merchant body, the first Chinese commodity fair was held jointly by government and businessmen in Hubei. This event was closely related to the development of capitalism in Hubei; indeed, a great deal of potential for modern economic development existed in this region at the time, especially in the natural environment and resources. The supervision of Zhang Zhidong, however, was required for the appropriate conditions to be put in place.

The contribution of Zhang Zhidong

Zhang Zhidong was a famous official and representative of the Westernization Movement (洋務運動) in the Qing Dynasty.

Zhang Zhidong is noted for making a series of important contributions to the modernization of China. For example, in 1889, when he was the governor of Huguang (湖廣), he initiated an early series of large-scale modernization projects.

Zhang's innovations led to significant achievements in industry, transportation, agriculture, finance, the military, and education, as well as other areas, including business. He was instrumental in creating the necessary conditions for the development of business, including modernization of the traffic network to allow more convenient transportation of goods. These developments, especially in industry and agriculture, led to a large number of exhibits for the 1909 fair, as well as marketing objects and marketplaces. These innovations provided the basis for the rapid development of business in Hubei.

As a direct result of Zhang's forward thinking and active promotion, local government in Hubei also supported the development of these new initiatives. Zhang suggested that local government should emulate Western countries and Japan, and he urged the establishment of workshops and held trade fair in coastal cities as well as in inland provinces.

Zhang Zhidong is noted for remarking that “the Chinese only knew the West was strong in business, but did not know that it was also strong in industry.” Expositions at this time were common in Western countries to gather goods and generate innovation via competition. The Japanese, for example, followed the Western model and built a series of industrial workshops.

The Influence of the Wuhan Trade Fair

The Wuhan Trade Fair of 1909 promoted new industry and commerce in modern China. Its modern nature excited the development of capitalist industry and commerce in Hubei; this event had a great and important impact on the early modernization of Hubei.

3 Duanfang and the 1910 Nanyang Fair

The 1910 Nanyang Fair was the first nationwide Chinese commodities fair. In this context, Nanyang refers to the Liangjing (兩京) region with the city of Nanjing (南京) at its center. The Liangjing region includes Jiangsu (江蘇), Anhui (安徽) and Jiangxi (江西).

Duanfang (托忒克／端方, 1861–1911) was the governor of Liangjing and a famous official of the Qing Dynasty.

The 1910 Nanyang Fair was initiated following investigations by five commissioners who travelled abroad from December 1905 to August 1906. This fact-finding mission was headed by Duanfang and Dai Hongci (戴鴻慈, 1853–1910) who led a group of 30 people on a visit to a series of Western countries including Japan, America, England, France, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Austria, and Russia. Subsequent to this overseas investigation, it was decided to adopt the Meiji Restoration as a blueprint and establish a constitution. The main contribution of Duanfang was thus to include political aspects based on Europe and America; this document came to be regarded as an important study in the context of the Chinese constitutional movement.

Note that the full name of the 1910 Nanyang Fair is the First Nanyang Fair, often abbreviated to the Nanyang Fair.

In 1909, Duanfang and Chen Qitai (陳啟泰) requested that the First Nanyang Fair be held to promote industry and inspire wisdom. It was their clear intention that other fairs would be held on an annual basis after the first one but the 1911 revolution meant that this became impossible. It is also of note that Duanfang did not want to call this event an “Expo,” insisting on the name “Fair,” so as to avoid a deficit.

4 Zhang Jian and the Modern Chinese Exposition

Zhang Jian (張謇, 1853–1926) was a leading Chinese industrialist and educator. The only comparable with Shibusawa Eiichi (渋沢栄一) of Japan.

As a result of global expositions, the influence of industry in Western countries can be seen all over the world. In modern China, a variety of expositions continue to be held one after another, in part as a result of Zhang Jian’s contribution to the development of this cause. Indeed, Zhang Jian was a key pioneer in the field of Chinese modern expositions; his ideas and contributions feature in many aspects of these expositions today, and as such he is one of the most important careers in recent Chinese history. His great character as both an agent and a merchant are also evident.

In 1903, Zhang Jian visited Japan to observe and study the Osaka Fair; this event is cited as

a turning point in his career.

Zhang Jian suggested that a Chinese Fishery Branch be set up for attendance at the 1904 Saint Louis Expo and he also ensured that the China Domestic Products Fair of 1915 benefited directly from the influence of the President of the time Yuan Shikai, the Agribusiness Chief Zhang Jian, and the House General Zhu Qiqian (朱啟鈞, 1872–1964).

The 1928 China Domestic Products Fair

Following the inauguration of the Nanjing National Government in 1927, a change in policy was made towards revolutionary construction. Subsequently, more attention was paid to expositions with the aim of developing industry.

As a result of his position as the minister of industry and commerce, Kong Xiangxi (孔祥熙, 1880–1967) made a speech entitled Announcement of Industry and Commerce in preparation for the exposition of March 1928 when the China Domestic Products Fair was held in Shanghai.

The Hangzhou (杭州) WestLake Exhibition in 1929

Zhang Jingjiang (張靜江, 1877–1950) was closely associated with the 1929 WestLake Exhibition in Hangzhou, held on June 6th of that year. At that time, Cheng Zhenjun (程振鈞, 1886–1964) was the director of the Department of Construction in Zhejiang (浙江) Province and was appointed as chairman of the preparatory committee for the Westlake Exhibition by Zhang Jingjiang. Cheng Zhenjun also served as vice president of the exhibition; the chairman of the government of Zhejiang Province, Zhang Jingjiang was president of the overall exhibition.

Testament to his vision, Zhang Jingjiang was referred to as the “Revolution Saint” (革命聖人) by Sun Yat-sen (孫中山, 1866–1925), while Chiang Kai-shek (蔣介石, 1887–1975) called him “The Leader of Revolution” (革命領袖).

By 1901, Zhang Jingjiang was operating the Tongyun Company (通運公司) in Paris and so understood the importance of expositions. When he returned to China, he began to prepare an exposition to develop national industry. This was the impetus behind the decision in November 1928 to host the WestLake Exhibition in Hangzhou to revive Chinese industry. This exhibition was the first of its kind to be held in China.

Government Influence on the Development of Modern Chinese Expositions

Chinese local governments are supported by political power and financial resources. This is evidenced by the fact that:

i) All the firms that exhibited at the Wuhan and Nanyang fairs were comprised of government officials and local businessmen. In the case of the Wuhan trade fair in 1909 and the Nanyang

Fair in 1910, all aspects of organization, advocacy, official launch, and review required the direct support of the government. The general office both trade fairs were voluntarily staffed by government officials and local merchants.

ii) Direct investment. The government made an investment in the Wuhan trade fair and all monies were raised by officials. Half of the Nanyang Fair was supported by officials and businessmen.

iii) Preferential policies and patent awards that are tax-free. When the Wuhan Trade Fair was held, for example, no tax was applied to the goods on sale.

ix) Incentivization policies. The government assisted the review committee of the Wuhan Trade Fair with an award for organization as well as an award for the best items on exhibit.

Conclusion

In the history of modern Chinese expositions, Zhang Zhidong, Duan Fang, Zhang Jian, Yuan Shikai, Zhou Xuexi, Zhang Jingjiang, and others have all played key roles. However, it is of note that the World Expo has yet to be hosted in modern China. This is perhaps because Chinese modern exhibitions depend to a large extent on the attitude of officials; as a result of a lack of stability and continuity, policies often change as soon as political power structures change (人存政立, 人亡政息).

It is also the case that a number of expositions only began because of the impetus provided by one or two dignitaries. For example, the Wuhan Trade Fair depended on the influence of Zhang Zhidong and Chen Kuilong, the Tianjin Fair was hosted because of Yuan Shi-kai, and Zhou Xuexi, and the Nanyang Fair was due to Duanfang and Chen Qitai. Finally, the 1915 National Goods Exhibition took place because of the influence of Zhang Jian while the 1929 West-Lake Exhibition was due to Zhang Jingjiang and Cheng Zhenjun.

Of the 14 expositions that took place in 1910, for example, just four took place independently of government officials. The remaining ten were either directly sponsored by the government, or set up by the government as part of a larger international exposition.

The success, or failure, of Chinese modern expositions depends on current affairs, national conditions, and staffing levels. Before 1910, Chinese expositions were set up without regulations, as a result of political celebrities or business proposals, or because of the stimulus of an event. It is the case that subsequent to the China Domestic Products Fair in 1928, Chinese modern expositions became more and more institutionalized.